

The Apostle Paul's Thanksgiving Topics

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Key Verse:2, "We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers."

Look at verse 1a. "Paul, Silas^[a] and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians..." Before diving into the passage, we need to look at a little historical and geographical background to the church in Thessalonica. Look at the map of Paul's second missionary journey. As the Lord Jesus had prophesied, the gospel that began in Jerusalem, would go to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In the map, we can see that Paul left from Jerusalem and started heading up north. While on his journey he met a disciple named Timothy in Lystra, who also joined him on his missionary journeys, including Silas. This is why Paul begins his letter with the names, "Paul, Silas and Timothy." They were like the missionary Dream Team, working together and taking care of God's people in various parts of the world. They were often sent by the Jerusalem council to visit the early churches to give them spiritual encouragement and guidance. The result of their visits is recorded in Acts 16:5, "⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers." Several years ago, during the covid pandemic, P. Ron visited Podil UBF church and encouraged everyone with his message. He also mentioned all the different vaccination and booster shots he had to take to make the trip. Also, P. Mark visited and encouraged our Odessa UBF coworkers during war time in Ukraine. He also met us in Hungary while we were displaced there during the war. While they were traveling Paul wanted to go to the province of Asia towards Bithynia. But the Holy Spirit prevented them from going there. Instead, they were guided by a vision to Macedonia. Acts 16:9-10 reads, "⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." So, they headed in that direction following God's guidance.

When they entered Macedonia, they stopped first at Neapolis, where another member Luke, joined the missionary Dream Team. He was the team doctor and historian. Then they headed to Phillipi where they met Lydia, who became the first convert on European soil. However, their stay in Phillipi did not end well because they were persecuted and harassed by idol making businessmen. Paul had healed a girl who was possessed by an evil spirit that gave her the ability to tell fortunes of people. It was a type of witchcraft. After healing this girl, the businessmen lost their business because they had been charging people money for her to tell their fortune. There was a big scuffle and Paul and Silas ended up being beaten and spending a night in jail. But they were so happy to suffer for the name of Christ that they sang songs in jail and even the jail guard and his family became believers through their witness. Then after getting out of jail by a miracle from God, they went to Thessalonica to avoid more persecution. With the historical background done, we can begin in verse 1.

Look at verse 1. “Paul, Silas^[a] and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.” When Paul first reached Thessalonica, he went to the synagogue where he used his rabbi status to preach the gospel. He did this for several Sabbath days, explaining and proving that the Christ has to suffer and rise from the dead. Through his clear gospel message some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and prominent women of standing. They became believers and established a personal relationship with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Paul also mentions the Holy Spirit in verses 5-6. So, from the beginning of his letter, Paul was proclaiming to them the Trinity—God the Father, Jesus His Son, and the Holy Spirit. By accepting the gospel truth, they received from God grace and peace. Grace is receiving God’s favor and peace is the result. We all really want peace living in this tumultuous and unstable world we live in. But real peace does not come from anything that the world gives, but from God Himself. An old friend of mine once wrote that he took his beautiful wife for a wonderful vacation to the Bahamas. He should have been peaceful after that but he said after returning home he was depressed for a week. Another friend took a wonderful but tiresome vacation. After coming home she said, “I need a vacation from my vacation.” Real, lasting peace, comes only from God the Father, who gives us deep peace in our souls through His Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Look at verses 2-3. ² We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” When Paul, Silas, Timothy, and others thought and prayed about the Thessalonian Christians they were so thankful to God for them. Actually, if the ministry was growing there, why would Paul leave? In reality, he was forced out of Thessalonica because of terrible and violent persecutions from the Jews who opposed Paul’s gospel ministry. What do you think sometimes happens when a new ministry begins to grow and flourish? Usually, in the case of the early gospel ministry, opposition arose because of jealousy. The Jews became jealous because of their Jewish members and others were leaving the synagogue to follow the Church of Christ. So, this Jewish opposition rounded up a mob to drive Paul and his friends out of town. Paul had to move on to other cities like Berea and Athens. It was believed that in Athens, months later, that Paul became very concerned about the growing church in Macedonia because he was forced to leave it behind. That is why he sent Timothy back to get an updated report about their spiritual condition. When Paul heard the good news from Timothy about their spiritual progress he praised and thanked God for them. This is why he wrote this letter to them. In verse 3, we find three things that caused Paul to praise and thank God for them.

Look at verse 3 again. ³ We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” First of all, Paul thanked God for their “work produced by faith.” This can be tricky theologically because we are not saved by our works. But faith without works is also a contradiction in terms. James 2:17-18 reads, “In the same way, faith by itself, if is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” James is saying that we are saved by faith alone, but faith should not stand alone. After receiving the wonderful grace of salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit works in us, and compels us to follow God’s will for our lives. To be more and more Christ-like in our daily walk. If you follow the steps of Jesus, then it is inevitable that you will want to serve the church, help those in need, and share the gospel with others. Secondly, Paul praised God for their “labor prompted by love.” As believers, we become conduits of God’s grace and love for others. Because God so loved the people of the world, we also want to love people in the world who need Jesus. I always remember one of Maria’s sisters who made

such a delicious meal and people asked her how she made it. She answered, “I made it with love.” Love really prompts us to give our best in the things we do. Parents and grandparents are willing to make many sacrifices like loss of sleep and time in order to help their children and grandchildren because they love them. Even dog and cat lovers will sacrifice a lot because they love their pets. In God’s work, how much more we should do our best because of our love for our Lord Jesus, who sacrificed and gave himself for us. Last of all, Paul praised God for their “hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Believers are hopeful people because of their faith in Jesus. It may seem that in some parts of the world things are going crazy or out of control with wars or political turmoil. Even in our personal lives things can go from bad to worse very quickly. But believers continue to have God’s hope in their hearts because of their faith in Jesus, who overcame the power of death through his resurrection.

As most of you know, Maria and I had a church plant in Kyiv, Ukraine, called Podil UBF in 2010. Because of the ongoing war began by Russia we came back to Chicago a little over two years ago. But every day except Sundays, since the war began, we have had a prayer meeting for them with prayer coworkers from around the world. We thank God for their faith and endurance in spite of this terrible war going on in their country. Though they are a small church, they are growing and do their best to serve God and love others in Jesus. They continue to meet every week for worship service, Bible study, prayer meetings, and outreach activities. Please continue to pray for them and that this terrible war in their country to end soon. This year was the 14th anniversary of Podil UBF and we thank God for sustaining the work that He began these past 14 years. God continue to bless them many more years. In the next few verses, we find the real reason why there was a mighty work of God going on among them.

Look at verses 4-5. “⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters^[b] loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.” It was not easy for the Thessalonian believers to stand as a strong church in the godless culture they lived in. Also, their church founders and leaders were driven out. But Paul wanted to assure them that they were loved by God. Not only that, but that they were chosen by God. We call this theologically, God’s election or also known as predestination. It is a conundrum that in the city of Thessalonica, with a population of around 200,000 people, that God only chose this group of believers

to accept Jesus, as their Lord and Savior. But this is what the Bible teaches. At the same time, remember when God flooded the world and judged mankind only 8 people entered the ark and were saved. Even Jesus said to his disciples who left everything to follow him in John 15:16a, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." When we simply accept the doctrine of God's election by faith, even though we cannot understand it fully, then we can always remain humble and thankful to God for calling us out of the evil world to live in His grace and mercy. When we truly and simply accept this by faith, the Holy Spirit works powerfully in our lives and we have deep conviction in our hearts and souls. At the end of verse 5 Paul wrote, "You know how we lived among you for your sake." Paul and his team of missionaries had witnessed in their short time with them powerful Christian lives. In spite of strong opposition against them, they continued to work hard to preach the gospel to the Thessalonians and serve them with all of their hearts and strength. They were not weak and helpless men. God worked mightily in them and through them. Paul and his team worked hard so that they would not be a burden to others and God provided for their daily needs. When they preached or taught them the Scriptures the Holy Spirit convicted the Thessalonians' hearts of their sins and need of salvation in Jesus. Their short but very powerful visit had a lasting impact on the young Thessalonian believers.

Look at verses 6-7. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." At the beginning of my message, I had been talking about the suffering of Paul and his team because of persecution. But in these verses, we learn that the Thessalonian believers were also suffering persecution and opposition because of their faith. Especially, the Jews who became followers of Christ were persecuted by their fellow Jews who ostracized them from the synagogue and mocked them for leaving their cultural heritage to follow a crucified man. The Greeks and pagans also stopped worshipping idols that their families had been worshipping. They no longer participated in the unholy activities that they had once participated in. They began to serve others and the ministry wholeheartedly. They sacrificed and offered for God's work even in their poverty. They were willing to make these sacrifices because they were following the good examples of the apostles, and most of all, following the example of their Lord and Savior Jesus. They did not sacrifice grudgingly, but with joy that came from the

Holy Spirit dwelling in them. And they became good examples of believers to others until many people around the world heard about them.

Look at verses 8-9. “⁸ The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” Again, if we look at the map, we can see Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south. This was a vast territory, but yet the good example of the Thessalonian believers reached the ears of many people in different places of the world. And they also became good examples for us to follow. Can you say to new believers, “follow my example as a Christian”? Or should we say, “follow the example of Jesus and others, but don’t follow my example”? As believers and part of God’s elect, we should strive and do our best to live lives that are holy and pleasing to God. We love and serve God’s people and the local church so that we can be good examples for other believers. More than just words, people should be able to see our actions and deeds and conclude that we are God’s people. Most of all, the changed lives of believers are the best testimony. Paul wrote, “They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” As aforementioned, the Thessalonians lived in a big city for that time, with many kinds of idol worship. Many of them, if not all, had worshiped idols as part of their culture. But after accepting the gospel and Jesus as Lord, they threw their idols away, and worshiped the one true and living God.

In our times, there can also be many temptations of idols like sexual sins, money, career and even family because idols are those we worship and cherish more than God. But we must know that in the long run, idols do more harm because they turn us away from the one and only living God. These days, in our woke generation, the idol of “identity” has had a powerful effect. Identity is important, but we can truly find our identity when we come to our Creator God, who made us in His image and likeness. Actually, Jesus knew how “self” can become a powerful idol. So, he said to his disciples in Luke 9:23, “Then he said to them all, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” Here Jesus is not telling believers to deny the basic needs of man like food or work or a vacation from time to time, but deny the sinful nature in us that is contrary to God’s will and purpose for our lives. God wants us to follow the example of our Lord Jesus and take up the cross of

serving Him and the needy of the world, especially those who desperately need to hear the gospel. But our “self” is the enemy that wants us to live for ourselves, our pleasures, our concerns, and forget about everybody else. Then we cannot be a good Christian examples for others to follow. More than just trying to be a good Christian example, we ought to really consider what will happen in the future. The future of God’s impending judgment also compels us to consider what is truly important in our temporary lives in this world.

Look at verse 10. “¹⁰...and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” When we know that something very important is coming up, we are willing to put everything aside and put that as of first importance. The most important event is the coming again of our Lord and Savior Jesus. The first time he came as the humble shepherd and sacrificial lamb who died for the sin of the world. But the second time he will come as King and Judge of the earth. Second Corinthians 5:10 reads, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” When we know this truth and believe this in our hearts, then we can live like the Thessalonians who really knew what was the most important thing in life. It was waiting for the return of King Jesus. We also wait eagerly for Jesus’ return. God will not withhold His wrath forever. Our sins and the sin of the world has caused Jesus to be crucified on the cross. Those who have accepted God’s grace and mercy are God’s elect who will be saved from the final judgment. But those who have rejected God’s love and mercy will face God’s wrath someday. May God help us to live exemplary Christian lives like the Thessalonians so that others may be encouraged by our lives of faith. May God help us learn from the Apostle Paul what we should be really thankful for this Thanksgiving season.

I have many thanksgiving topics because of God’s work beginning at Podil UBF. Since Maria and I left in 2022 due to the war in Ukraine, God has done his own mighty work. Beginning by raising Vlad as a successor, God has blessed the ministry to grow through much prayer support by God’s people around the world and various outreach activities. On Tuesdays they have had English Club, Wednesdays Bible studies and apologetic outreaches. They recently even had a dance outreach. They also serve many people suffering due to the war with donations and prayers. Personally, I thank God that I could have regular Bible study with brothers from Podil UBF—Oles, Kir, and Kirill. Thank God for Zoom technology. I also thank God that I have had regular Bible studies with students

in Chicago—Julio and Becky, Noah, and Neil. M. Maria thanks God for teaching the Bible to 5 UIC students. I thank God for his mighty work and revival at UIC ministry and WestLoop UBF. Because my family lives at the UIC Bible house, I saw that UIC ministry has so many Bible studies that they recruited Kathy Vucekovich to come to UIC to teach the Bible. Somedays I see students on every floor of the Bible house from the basement to the third floor. Some mornings they come very early in the morning to the Bible house while I am sleeping. Sometimes, they stay too late at night and I have to tell them to go home. “Please go home. Come back tomorrow.” I thank God for faithful and precious coworkers here at Chicago UBF who have been praying for our family and Podil UBF for so many years. May God help us at this Thanksgiving season see the great work of God that He is doing among us so that we can really give thanks to God as the Apostle Paul did. Amen.

Footnotes

- a. 1 Thessalonians 1:1 Greek *Silvanus*, a variant of *Silas*
- b. 1 Thessalonians 1:4 The Greek word for *brothers and sisters* (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God’s family; also in 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25, 27